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METHODS OF SUNDAY-SCHOOL TEACHING.

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IN Sunday-school teaching, as in all intelligent self-directed work, method is subordinate to purpose. But it by no means follows that method is unimportant. A good method consists simply in such an adjustment of means to the existing conditions as is conducive to the attainment of the end in view. If the end is important, such adjustment is inferior in importance only to the end itself. Method, we have said, using the term generically. But it would be more exact to speak of methods in Sunday-school teaching. For the pupils of our Sunday schools cover so wide a range of age and intelligence, and the study of the Bible itself includes so many different specific kinds of study, that it is highly improbable that the same method is equally adapted to all classes and all subjects. Nor is it good pedagogy to leave the choice of method to chance or the mere instinct of the teacher. A "natural teacher" will accomplish much by any method, and will to a certain extent instinctively adjust his method to the particular problem presented by a given lesson and a given class. But not all teachers are "natural teachers," and even for those that are such, instinctive, unreflecting adjustment of means to end can hardly do the work of reflection and intelligence. Sunday-school teaching is a work of too much importance to be done with any less than the most intelligent possible adjustment of methods to existing conditions and ends in view.

What, then, are the possible methods of Sunday-school teaching? Leaving out of account for the present the very youngest scholars, those who cannot yet read or write, we may name four methods which singly or in combination may be employed in Sunday-school teaching: the recitation method, the conversation method, the lecture method, the seminar method.

The recitation method presupposes the assignment of specific tasks and the report of the pupil upon those tasks, either orally or in writing. It naturally implies a text-book or something equivalent to it. Such a text-book may be the Bible itself, portions of which are committed to memory and recited in the class. It may be a "lesson quarterly" containing questions to be studied at home and answered in class. It may be some book on biblical history or biblical teaching in which the content of the Bible is presented in a form for study and recitation. Recitation may be oral or written, or partly one and partly the other. The central aim, intellectually speaking, of the recitation method is to induce the pupil to study the lesson before coming to the class, and the chief use of the lesson-hour, again speaking from the intellectual point of view, and ignoring, though by no means undervaluing, the spiritual and religious aim which is dominant in the whole process, is to hear the pupils' answers, approving those that are right and correcting those that are wrong. The work of instruction, in the exact sense of the word, is reduced to a minimum by such a method strictly applied. The teacher is not so much an instructor as a quiz-master, though by no means necessarily in an offensive sense of the term. His duty is not so much to teach the pupil as to see that the pupil learns what is set him to learn. The great advantage of such a method is that, given a good text-book and a faithful application of the method, the pupil is sure to get some real and valuable information, some weekly addition to his store of biblical knowledge. Nor is the function of the teacher a menial one. To induce the pupil to study, so to conduct the lesson-hour that he will be interested and ambitious to prepare his lesson beforehand, and that the recitation of it will be interesting and illuminating, setting the facts in clearer light and impressing them more deeply on his mind—all this is work which is much above the menial level, and may tax to the utmost the ingenuity and ability of even a bright and earnest teacher.

The chief dangers of such a method are two. On the one side there is the danger of a rigid, mechanical, unsympathetic way of employing it. A Sunday-school teacher—the same danger

exists in the teaching of arithmetic and geography — who comes to his work with no knowledge of the subject beyond that contained in the specific lesson assigned in the text-book, who has no insight and no outlook, may indeed put the questions set down to be answered, or call for a recitation of the matter assigned to be learned, but he can never be a true teacher. No amount of strictness in enforcing set tasks can supply the place of enthusiastic interest in the subject and the pupils. Such interest and enthusiasm are especially needful in Sunday-school teaching, where the things taught depend so much for their effectiveness on the spirit in which they are taught, and where even the retention of the pupil in the school is often dependent, not on parental authority, but on the maintenance of his interest in his work.

But an even greater danger, and one which is much oftener realized in experience, is that the recitation method shall prove ineffective through a lax and unskilful use of it. In multitudes of classes in which this method is supposed to be employed, the class being supplied with a text-book and the text-book itself being constructed for this method and for no other, there is scarcely a pretense of real study beforehand, or of real recitation in the class. The teacher does not expect the pupil to prepare the lesson beforehand; and the pupil does not disappoint the teacher's expectation. If the lesson calls for written answers, the teacher neither has such answers read in the class nor examines them afterward. If there are questions to be answered orally, these are read off to the class in general, not addressed to any particular pupil; they are answered by the one or two pupils in the class whose general biblical knowledge enables them to make an extempore reply, and the exercise closes with a few earnest remarks of a religious purpose, the force of which is largely lost because they have no root or basis in the questioning and answering that have preceded, and there has been no preparation of the soil of the mind to receive spiritual truth. Anything much more profitless than this, more calculated to discourage study and to give to the pupils a

distaste for the Sunday school, for the study of the Bible, and for the Bible itself, it would be hard to devise.

The fault, however, lies in both these cases not chiefly in the method, but in the unskilful or negligent employment of it. The recitation method, either alone or as the chief element of a combination of methods, is the best yet devised for pupils between the ages of eight and sixteen. What is needed is intelligence, enthusiasm, conscientiousness in the employment of it.

The distinctive characteristic of the conversation method is that it substitutes extempore questioning and discussion for the assigned tasks. Instead of finding out what the pupil has already learned, the teacher sets him to thinking and studying on the spot, leads him by a Socratic process of questioning to perceive the facts, and to see the truth in the lesson as he could not have seen it beforehand. The teacher in this case *teaches*, not simply hears the pupil recite.

In the hands of a skilful teacher this method can be made both very attractive and very instructive, even for a class which has not studied the lesson at all beforehand. But this very fact suggests one of the dangers of such a method. Because it can be used without previous study on the part of the class, because it is more interesting than the hearing of recitations, there is a constant tendency on the part of the pupils to neglect preparation, and on the part of the teacher to allow them to do so. And when this danger is actually realized, it easily opens the door for another, viz., the degeneration from real Socratic instruction into mere desultory conversation. The lack of preparation on the part of the pupil makes impossible the best kind of teaching. The teacher is first compelled and then contented to move on the mere surface of the matter, and the method, at first resorted to in order to make the exercise more interesting than a recitation, ends by being more dull and more unprofitable than the most rigid kind of reciting. Almost any person of wide observation in Sunday-school work must have seen illustrations of precisely these results.

The way of escape from these dangers of the conversation method is obvious. It ought never to be used singly and

alone, save for a class of adults, who for some reason cannot be induced to study the lesson beforehand. In such a case a skilful teacher can compel his pupils to study with him for the hour of the class-meeting, though they will not do it beforehand, and may, by constant watchfulness, keep the work from degenerating into desultory discussion of unimportant or irrelevant matters. But for a class made up of pupils capable of being induced to study beforehand, the conversation method should always be accompanied by some elements of the recitation method. The pupil should have definite work to do beforehand and should be given an opportunity to show that he has done it. This may be accomplished in various ways. The simplest way, and perhaps the poorest, is to divide the hour, spending a part of it in recitation, a part in discussion. Another method which a skilful teacher may use is in the course of discussion to test the pupil's preparation and thus stimulate him always to come prepared. Still another way, of which much more use might be made than is usually the case, is to assign certain questions beforehand to be answered in writing. In this case it is indispensable that the teacher should read these answers, and hand them back with suggestions and corrections to the pupil.

These and other means which will suggest themselves to ingenious teachers may be employed to stimulate and guide the pupil in his study outside the class-hour, and so to prevent the intellectual and moral degeneration of the class-work.

What has been said sufficiently indicates that neither the recitation method nor the conversation method is satisfactory alone, but each requires complementing by the other, and that neither method alone, nor both methods together, can be successfully employed without common sense, industry, ingenuity, and sympathy on the part of the teacher.

(To be continued in the next issue.)